

Stress and Psychological Support in Modern Military Operations: A Military Leader's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

From the experiences as a commander taking part in 6 peace support operations in Hong Kong, Cambodia, Bosnia and Africa the principles of Leadership and Stress Management appeared to be useful to provide psychological support to deployed troops. Key factors in Stress Management are realistic training, fostering unit cohesion in arduous environments, communicating and providing time outs. Systematic evaluations of post deployment care show that third location decompressions allow deployed personnel to share their experiences immediately after a deployment and help to reach mental health care professionals if necessary. Evaluations of mental health care and reunions, which are organized five years after a deployment, show that the deployed personnel highly appreciates this type of care and the possibility to share the memories of those days. Commanders need the support of military mental health professionals in caring for those deployed personnel who cannot cope with their deployment experiences.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Stress is a word that is often used to cover a whole range of feelings and emotions. Stress is a normal part of life. What stresses you does not necessarily stress me. There are many varying definitions of stress. Some researchers distinguish between Eustress (when something changes for the better) and Distress (when something changes for the worse). Others use stress to cover anxiety. By which I mean a fear of what may happen. In a military environment stress is often related to fear. My definition would be: "Stress is a reaction to pressure or a threat that may exceed an individual's ability to cope with it."

Before presenting my perspective on stress and psychological support in modern military operations, I would like to explain my background as a Commander of Dutch Marine Corps Units and as Commander of Multi- National formations in Peace Support Operations (PSO). I have been taking part in leading functions in several PSO in the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in 1992/93, in United Nations Provide Force (UNPROFOR) in former Yugoslavia in 1995, in the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) from 2000-2002 and lately in Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies en République Démocratique du Congo (MONUC) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formally Zaire) from 2005 until today. Furthermore, I took part in Operations Other than War (OOTW) in Hong Kong during OP CULEX in 1979 and in Bosnia/Herzegovina in 1997. I will focus on

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my experience in those operations. Several times during PSO my units encountered situations more akin to all out war: those who were operating as spoilers in the same environment were bound by no restriction and demonstrated no restraint.

I will touch upon the problems of stress during and after operations. I will discuss the realities in some of the operations I was involved in and how stress was managed from a Dutch perspective^{1 2}. I will share some experiences from my time as Military Adviser to the Secretary General of the UN and I will elaborate on the stress endured by units deployed in MONUC. I will finish with my personal conclusions and some recommendations.

2.0 MAIN QUESTION

The main question to me is: **How do military leaders address stress and how do our (national) military organizations give psychological support to our military personnel in need?**

3.0 PRE-DEPLOYMENT MANAGEMENT OF STRESS

A commander must start the management of stress during the preparations for an operational deployment. A number of factors should be considered. The first factor is realistic training, which simulates combat conditions as closely as possible. If men are subjected to stressful conditions in training, they should experience less stress later in combat or comparable circumstances. Clausewitz once said: "It is of first importance that the soldier high or low should not have to encounter in war things which seen for the first time set him in terror or perplexity".

Before the deployment of my battalion to Cambodia in 1992, I invited an old friend, who is a medical doctor in the Royal Navy, to deliver a few lectures about his experiences in the Falklands War. I asked him to show as many horrifying pictures as he had to prepare my men for the shock of battle, especially the wounds likely to be faced. That helped the marines to cope mentally with, for example (civilian) mine casualties who, on many occasions, would be left with my marines to be taken care of. I also estimated that exposure to unpleasant pictures would also immune them slightly to first sight of injury and boost their confidence in dealing with casualties. Of course you can never fully prepare but this approach did help. The second factor for the management of stress is unit cohesion, perhaps best described as ethos. Members of a cohesive group provide comfort and support for each other and that helps to reduce the effects of a shocking environment or experience. How to achieve higher unit cohesion? In our Marine Corps the units are trained under arduous conditions. We do so under our yearly cycle of mountain and arctic training in parts of Scotland, Norway, Romania and other inhospitable areas like the jungles of Belize and Suriname. People tend to bond together in those kinds of environments or conditions. 'Training skills and leadership under harsh conditions from terrain and climate works as a pressure cooker. In these environments one can teach skills and leadership techniques in a shorter time and with more effect. It is a very efficient and effective way of training'³. I would add however, that no matter how tight a group becomes through training, there is still a clear need to identify the causes and signs of stress.

Another factor of stress management is establishing good communication between the commander and his subordinates. Uncertainty and ambiguity are among the greatest sources of stress. The commander must train his men to expect the unexpected and he must train himself to pass on information, to keep all those around him informed and up to speed with developments. This latter point should not just focus on the immediate surroundings but also on national and international developments. I have found that troops have a thirst for information when tensions and dangers increase. If soldiers have confidence in their leaders at all levels, if leaders are honest and straight and if the chain of command is open to a degree of discussion and debate then I have found that the feeling of some ownership in the course of events to be helpful in getting soldiers to understand the context in which they are risking their lives for the betterment

of others or a cause. The last point I would like to mention is the teambuilding factor, in particular the command team. It proved to be very much worthwhile to have trained my battalion command team in the Battle Group Trainer in Bovington, United Kingdom – this was a tough test and it really glued us together. Subsequently, when the unit faced difficult circumstances on operations the command team worked like clockwork and I was thankful for past teambuilding through tough training.

4.0 REALITIES

4.1 UNTAC

During the PKO in Cambodia my marines were faced with several stressful circumstances. I will mention three; first the mine threat. The Dutch sector was littered with mine fields and scattered mines. Furthermore the Khmer Rouge used the mine as a weapon in their effort to derail the peace process and preparations for the elections. Patrolling under these conditions was not easy and became increasingly stressful when UN cars were hit by mines. Second factor was the local people that were hit by mines. Most of the time those mine victims were transported and handed over to my marines. The wounds caused by mines were awful. The last point I want to mention is the exchange of fire by our troops and the Khmer Rouge elements – this was fairly constant and as a result stress was a consistent factor in the lives of my soldiers.

4.2 UNPROFOR

The Dutch Marine Corps took part in the Multi National Brigade of the Rapid Reaction Force of UNPROFOR with a Mortar Company of 120mm Mortars and staff officers. The Company had Mortar Fire Controllers who were deployed forward and were faced with the destruction caused by the mortar fire that they directed on the target. Their forward positions were very exposed and fired at regularly by Serbian snipers.⁴ Lastly the route down the mountains of the IGMAN Mountain Ridge was extremely dangerous in terms of terrain, road and weather conditions; but not only that. The UN vehicles formed a vulnerable target for Serbian fire positions surrounding the outskirts of Sarajevo. The route was littered with burned out and destroyed vehicles. Driving that route was an unpleasant experience for everybody.

4.3 UNMEE

In 2000 and 2001 I was the Force Commander of the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea. The Netherlands participated with a marine battalion group, augmented with a company construction engineers from the Dutch army. The mission was a relatively “easy” mission as far as the threat was concerned. It was the misery of the local population that caused some of the military personnel mental and emotional trouble. Also a Canadian company was part of this Force, which encountered several traumatic incidents, resulting in significant psychological problems, like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)⁵.

4.4 OP Amber Star

This was a Special Forces operation in Bosnia/Herzegovina with a very high risk. After the successful outcome of the operation, an immediate debrief was held en route home to let steam off and let the soldiers wind down after dealing with very risky situations.

5.0 MANAGEMENT OF STRESS DURING THE OPERATION

Management of stress and the wellbeing of the soldiers in a unit is the ultimate responsibility of the Commanding Officer (CO); in turn the CO will rely on the chain of command. I would like to make a few observations.

5.1 Leadership

The first point I want to make is the influence of leadership. Commanding an operational unit means leading military personnel. That leadership becomes even more important when it has to be demonstrated under extra pressure⁶. To me, leadership means winning the hearts and minds of others in order to achieve a common purpose. ‘One wins the hearts of the people first by winning their trust, respect and confidence in you as a leader. Secondly, by making them wanted, valued, listened to, recognized: by generating feelings of excitement and involvement: by giving them a pride in their organization. One wins the minds of people by giving them clear directions and expectations and from distinct boundaries of territory, authority and responsibility to work within’⁷.

Leading under those circumstances means walking around, talking to the soldiers, listening to them, explaining and reassuring them whenever it is possible. All leaders from the CO to the corporal/section commander should be in a position to screen for mental trouble. They should identify those who need help. Any problems can be treated immediately, instead of having to deal with them later after redeployment and returning home.

5.2 Attention to Welfare

The second factor which is important is the attention to welfare. Contact with the “home front” by regular use of telephone⁸ and email is important to try to keep an emotional balance. Having a secure home front is a great source of comfort; conversely a difficult family relationship or friendship will unbalance the benefits of any welfare support.

Very much coupled to welfare is providing time outs. When a unit works hard, and is under a lot of pressure, it is necessary to give the soldiers a break from their stressful environment. Pulling troops out of the field occasionally and providing an opportunity for rest and recuperation is a good example of time out. Money should be budgeted for these needed breaks. There are also cheap ways of relieving managing stress: collective sports, matches against locals, fitness programmes, or perhaps writing a unit magazine. Much depends on the imagination of the leadership but all these tactics are designed to manage stress.

However, and in my experience, PTSD cannot always be avoided. Levels of stress tolerance differ between people. Sustained stress is different to short sharp stress and no matter how well you know your soldiers, and know them you must, you will not identify or prevent every case. It is a sad fact of our profession that stress levels are, and always will be, high.

6.0 POST DEPLOYMENT CARE

As a part of care for military personnel after the deployments to Cambodia in 1991-1993, the Royal Netherlands Marine Corps developed a policy on unit debriefing in small groups. Initially, small groups of the deployed unit had group sessions within a few weeks after their return to the Netherlands. This type of debriefing needed some improvement after the deployment to Bosnia in 1995, as the deployed unit appeared to be unsatisfied with this type of debriefing⁹. Scientific research into single session debriefing also raised questions on some types of debriefing^{10 11}. The debriefers or “screeners” should be well prepared and trained to detect people with significant emotional problems. This system has been improved in recent years after deployments to Ethiopia and Eritrea, Liberia, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Nowadays, a debriefing will take place immediately after departure of the mission area. After a mission in Iraq in 2004, an evaluation took place among the members of a marines company about the debriefing that they had participated in three days previously. The debriefing took place during a ‘third location decompression’ on the transit home. The stopover lasted a total of 72 hours, and took place in Cyprus.

After arrival, there was first of all time to rest from the journey, which had taken over 20 hours. There was then a social event. The next morning, the debriefing was held and information was given about health risks and professional help. The journey home was resumed on the third day. This type of debriefing and first screening has been found very satisfactory by the soldiers¹².

After completion of a mission, the feeling of unit cohesion does not go away when the commander or a marine says farewell to their unit. As soon as they meet again, there is recognition; you share the memories of those days together. There is a feeling of loyalty, and loyalty is emotion, and implies a deeply felt and close relationship¹³. For this reason, the Royal Netherlands Navy organizes reunions, five years after the deployment of a unit. An evaluation of such a reunion of the unit I deployed with in 1995 to Bosnia took place in 2001. Since 1999, a series of research projects have shown that military personnel value activities in post deployment care a lot¹⁴.

Military Adviser to Secretary General of the United Nations

During visits to the various UN Peace Keeping Missions in my capacity as Military Adviser, I saw several units which had been through very difficult emotional events. I give one example. In 2004 I was sent by the Secretary General to help in UNAMSIL in Sierra Leone with the aftermath of a UN helicopter crash in which 20 UN soldiers were killed and badly burned. In my discussions with the rescue teams, the unit from which the majority of the victims came from and several other people from the mission involved in the aftermath of the crash, it was clear that dealing with stress and emotions was not institutionalized. Counseling, internal discussions, commander's attitude and time outs for the soldiers was not a common approach and those in positions of responsibility had to be educated on the benefits of such an approach.

7.0 UNITED NATIONS OPERATIONS IN MONUC IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

From 1 February 2005 I have been commanding a UN Division of 15.000 soldiers from 47 countries and from 14 Troop Contributing Countries (TCC) in the Eastern part of the DRC. The majority of the soldiers are from non-western countries. The situation in the area of responsibility is highly volatile, with armed groups and foreign armed groups roaming the country, harassing the local population, killing, raping and looting. The UN soldiers are confronted with atrocities that are indescribable. Fighting between UN troops and opponents is taking place nearly every day. UN soldiers have been killed and sometimes terribly mutilated.

The expression: "In order to keep the Peace, one has to enforce it sometimes", is valid for our operations in MONUC under Chapter VII of the Charter at this moment.

Several TCCs are deployed for 6 months and several for one year. Several have some sort of an R&R program, some of them have none. Some of them have some sort of a welfare program, some of them have none. The vast majority of the soldiers have no preparation prior to deployment and neither is there a debriefing program at the end of their tour at all. They travel home and are reunited with their families. The soldiers from Islamic countries in particular, but also the soldiers from other religious backgrounds like Hindu and Buddhism, use their religion positively in dealing with stress and emotional problems¹⁵.

8.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 Role and Responsibilities of a Commander

Commanders at all levels should realize that they have responsibility for, and play a vital role in education and management of stress and for all the mental and emotional problems of the soldiers under their care.

Pre-deployment training, knowing your soldiers and the management of stress during and after operational deployments are fundamental to helping soldiers deal with adjusting their reactions to normal circumstances after having been under abnormal conditions .

The responsibilities of a commander are enormous, starting well before a deployment and probably never ending afterwards. For a Commander this is a lonely job. He cannot and must not abrogate responsibility. But he does not have to feel lonely when he puts his trust and his confidence in his subordinates. Make time for the people that are entrusted to your care and you will not be disappointed¹⁶.

8.2 Recommendations

I will end with a listing of some recommendations. During operations keep stress victims in or as close as possible to the mission area and to their own unit. The best psychological support the victims can get is from their “buddies”, their colleagues and their commanders. They have a shared experience and with careful sympathetic handling a soldier will recover rapidly. Remove a soldier from this environment too quickly and there is a danger he will be lost. During the debriefing well qualified “screeners” should try to identify those who need help. The attention of commanders to the stress casualties must continue for a considerable time and is important to the well being and restoration of individual self confidence.

Solve problems at the earliest stage possible. Too many problems are ignored for too long, because people think ‘it’ll get better by itself’. Diagnose at an early stage when military personnel find themselves in high-risk situations such as serious debt, criminal sentences, relationship problems, or when they show symptoms of depression or addiction. Bear in mind disappointments that people have to deal with, and give plenty time and attention to them. Schedule times within training on an annual basis when people can talk openly about things, including personal matters.

Take into account groups of people who, because of the above, are more likely to exhibit self-destructive behaviors¹⁷, and always call in professional help at an early stage. Work with a buddy system, in which the buddies often catch the first signs, and stimulate them to pass on this information. Emphasize the fact that it’s OK to seek help. Leaders play an important role in diminishing the prejudices that still exist with regard to mental health care. In the ultimate case of a suicide of a soldier, use the Spiritual Welfare Services and the Defense Social Work Department to focus on the consequences of a suicide for surviving relatives, as well as for fellow soldiers from the unit ¹⁸.

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